Gene Roberts and the history of reporting the JFK assassination 10/20/90

A long Style section story in today's Washington Post reports Roberts' retirement as editor of the Philadelphia Inquirer - at age 58 and after the paper, under his editorship, won 17 Pulitzer prizes in 18 years. Quite an impressive reflection of journalistic excellence! (The Post's story does not indicate how many were local stories, the paper's strength, but I assume that most if not all were local stories.)

This reminded me of what to me is an entirely different aspect of his career, how he killed a New York Times second-look at the JFK assassination, based on my second book, in late 1966.

Tom Wicker, then the Times' Washington bureau chief, in 1965 read the manuscript of my first book. He was impressed and sent it to Harrison Salisbury, then I think national editor. When he returned it to me Wicker told me that Salisbury, too, had been impressed. But they did nothing, except that later, Wicker tried to encourage W.W.Norton to publish it. Norton's stalling for four months and then asking me to reorganize it as an attack on the government at the least implying that the government was the assassin, is what persuaded me to publish Whitewash myself.

Then I had the manuscript of Whitewash II, which did not begin as a book but as a series of magazine articles requested by a French agency. I took a carbon copy of it to New York and went to the Times office, where I asked Salisbury to see me. It is easy to remember the day, if not the date - it was the day the Times fired its famous and widely-respected theater critic, Stanley Kauffman - and that created quite a furor!

So I sat for about two hours waiting for Salisbury to get free. When he did he had only a moment, but he told me he'd read it and to see him when I was next in New York.

I don't now remember whether he saw me that day or sent someone else out, but I do remember clearly that the Times, on the basis of Salisbury's reading of Whitewash II, had designated four staff reporters to talk to me and to look into what that book reported. I probably have notes on this but without trying to find them I do remember who two of the reporters were, Roberts and Peter Kihss. It is also my recollection that most of the reporters seemed disinterested. I sat with them and answered their questions.

Kihss later told me that they had divided up the work they would do and that Roberts was sent to the Archives to double-check my work there. According to Kihss, he reported that he could not find at the Archives what I used in Whitewash II. That was impossible for me to understand because with a single, deliberate exception, intended as a trap for the likes of Mark Lane, who fell for it and plagiarized, I gave the correct Archives file identification for ever document I used. That , according to Kihss, killed any additional Times look at the official account of the JFK assassination.

(And it also happened that the copy of the manuscript Salisburg mailed back to me never reached me. This is not the only such disappearance of a returned manuscript, even of letters relating to it, which never reached me. One killed publication by Fischer AG, a major German book publisher. Fischer wanted to published Whitewash. in 1965.)

Before going to the Times Roberts worked for a Detroit paper. My recollection of which and of whether or not he was involved in its faking of a sensational picture is not clear. I think he was involved in obtaining the picture but I'm not certain and I have no reason to believe that he was involved in the fakery by airbrush. Four publications, well, one was an agency, AP, got prints of the picture of Oswald in his back yard posing with the alleged assassination rifle. One was Life Magazine. Each of the four uses of this picture involved air brushing of it to make it consistent with the then official story. In one use even the telescopic sight was airbrushed out so that the rifle appeared not to have had such a sight mounted on it. A more self-destructive image of the intergrity of American journalism is hard to imagine, but it happened all four times! Each different than the others. But my point is what might the history of that assassination have been if Roberts had been of minimal honesty. That books atacks, 100%.